



**MARYLAND DEPARTMENT OF HUMAN RESOURCES**

*Maryland's Social Services Agency*



**PRESS RELEASE**

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**St. MARY'S COUNTY DEPARTMENT OF SOCIAL SERVICES AND  
COMMUNITY PARTNERS OPEN REGION'S CHILD ADVOCACY CENTER**

**BALTIMORE** – Today, St. Mary's County celebrated the formal opening of the St. Mary's County Child Advocacy Center in Lexington Park, Maryland. County Commissioners, St. Mary's County Department of Social Services director, Ella May Russell, and the Director of the County Department of Human Services, Bennett Connelly cut the ribbon and made remarks.

The St. Mary's County Child Advocacy Center will provide a safe, child-focused, child-friendly atmosphere where interviews of child victims of sexual abuse and serious physical abuse will take place. The center spotlights the importance of collaboration between law enforcement, the courts and the social service agencies in working to reduce the trauma abused children experience.

The facility is configured to enable one interviewer from law enforcement or child protective services to talk with the child, while other investigators observe from another room or review a video recording at a later time. This reduces the need for the child to have to retell the story to many different professionals.

"The goal is to ensure that children are not re-victimized by the very system designed to protect them," said Ella May Russell, director of the St. Mary's County Department of Social Services. "The center also provides for better communication and coordination between investigators, service providers and prosecutors so that the best interest of the child can be served."

An interagency team with support from a part-time coordinator provides oversight and management of the Child Advocacy Center. This interagency team has been working together for the last twelve months to draft a Memorandum of Understanding between the partner agencies, to make decisions on protocols and procedures, to plan for the use of the new space and to obtain funding and support for this effort on a sustained basis.

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Partner agencies include: St. Mary's County Department of Social Services, Department of Human Resources; St. Mary's County Local Management Board, Department of Human Services; St. Mary's County Office of the Sheriff; St. Mary's County State's Attorneys Office; St. Mary's Hospital; Office Of Child Care, Maryland State Department of Education; Walden-Sierra; Maryland State Police; Patuxent River Naval Air Station, and the Family Support Center. Each agency provides staff support to carry out the Child Advocacy Center's mission.

Funding for start-up and hiring of staff came from the Department of Human Resources and Governor's Office of Crime Control and Prevention; the Local Management Board of the County Department of Human Services paid for the lease and upgrades to the building that is owned by the County Office of Economic Development and provided the facility at a reduced cost for use as a Child Advocacy Center.

"This center continues our efforts to harness, coordinate and target resources to address community human service needs," said Brenda Donald, Secretary of the Maryland Department of Human Resources. "With this opening, we now have 21 child advocacy centers around the state."

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The Maryland Department of Human Resources is the state's social service provider. The agency collaborates with 24 local jurisdictions to: provide foster care, adoption and protective services to children; collect and distribute child support payments; and provide temporary cash, food stamps and medical assistance to families. It also funds programs for homeless persons, refugees, migrant workers, victims of crime and women who are displaced, battered or assaulted. Last year, DHR served 638,000 people in need. In terms of its annual budget, DHR is Maryland's fourth largest state agency.